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ABSTRACT

This statement examines the nature and impact of foreign language proficiency and personnel shortages in the Army, State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), discussing strategies used to address these shortages and efforts made to address current and projected shortages. All four agencies reported shortages of translators and interpreters and of staff such as diplomats and intelligence specialists with foreign language skills critical to successful job performance. These shortfalls varied significantly by agency, job position, language, and skill level. They have resulted in workload backlogs, which in turn affect agency performance; hindering the prosecution of criminal cases; limiting the ability to identify, arrest, and convict violent gang members; weakening the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking; and causing less effective representation of U.S. interests overseas. Agencies used a range of strategies to fill their foreign language needs (providing staff with language training and paying incentives, recruiting employees with foreign language skills or hiring contractors, and using information technology). One agency has adopted a strategic approach to workforce planning efforts that links the foreign language program to the agency's strategic objectives and program goals. The other three agencies have yet to pursue overall strategic planning. (SM)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Workforce Planning Could Help Address Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls

Statement of Susan S. Westin, Managing Director, International Affairs and Trade

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our recently completed report on foreign language proficiency and personnel shortfalls at four federal agencies.[1] Federal agencies' foreign language needs have grown significantly over the past decade with increasing globalization and a changing security environment in light of such events as the breakup of the Soviet Union and the terrorist attacks of September 11. Foreign language skills are increasingly needed to support traditional diplomatic efforts and public diplomacy programs, military and peacekeeping missions, intelligence collection, counterterrorism efforts, and international trade. One sign of this need is the budget devoted to hiring, training, and paying language-skilled staff. For example, the Department of Defense estimates that it currently spends up to $250 million annually to meet its foreign language needs.

At the same time that federal agencies find their needs for staff with foreign language skills increasing, these agencies have experienced significant reductions-in-force and no-growth or limited-growth environments during the last decade. As a result, some agencies must now contend with an aging core of language-capable staff while recruiting and retaining qualified new staff in an increasingly competitive job market.

Today I will discuss (1) the nature and impact of foreign language proficiency and personnel shortages in selected federal agencies, (2) the strategies that are being used to address these shortages, and (3) the efforts that have been made to address current and projected foreign language shortages. My observations are based on the results of our January 2002 report on the foreign language needs of the U.S. Army, the Department of State, the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). This work was initiated at the request of the House-Senate International Education Study Group, which includes Senators Thad Cochran and Christopher Dodd and Representatives James Leach and Sam Farr.

Finally, I would like to note that two other products supplement our recently issued report on federal agency foreign language needs. One is a "For Official Use Only" version of this report that includes information on

[1]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, GAO-02-375 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002).

the National Security Agency/Central Security Service and its foreign language operations.[2] The other is a classified report providing detailed foreign language staffing information about two of the agencies covered in our review—the National Security Agency/Central Security Service and the FBI.[3] I encourage government staff with a need to know and the appropriate clearance to read these supplemental products.

Before discussing the specifics of our work, let me provide a brief summary of our findings.

Summary

All four federal agencies covered in our review reported shortages of translators and interpreters as well as shortages of staff, such as diplomats and intelligence specialists, with foreign language skills that are critical to successful job performance. These shortfalls varied significantly depending on the agency, job position, language, and skill level. Agency officials noted that these shortfalls have resulted in workload backlogs which, in turn, affect the agency's performance. For example, the FBI has thousands of hours of audio tapes and pages of written material that have not been reviewed or translated due to the lack of qualified translators. In addition, the State Department has long suffered from a language proficiency shortfall whereby Foreign Service officers must be placed in language-designated positions at lower-than-desired levels of proficiency. According to agency officials, these types of shortfalls have hindered the prosecution of criminal cases; limited the ability to identify, arrest, and convict violent gang members; weakened the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking; and resulted in less effective representation of U.S. interests overseas.

The agencies we reviewed reported using a range of workforce strategies to fill their specific foreign language needs. These strategies included providing staff with language training and pay incentives, recruiting

[2]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foreign Languages: Five Agencies Could Use Human Capital Strategy to Handle Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, GAO-02-237 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002).

[3]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foreign Languages: Staffing Shortfalls and Related Information for the National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation*, GAO-C-02-258R (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002).

employees with foreign language skills or hiring contractors, or taking advantage of information technology. This technology includes using networked computers and contractor databases to optimize existing foreign language resources. While these assorted efforts have had some success, current agency strategies have not fully met the need for some foreign language skills.

To address current and projected foreign language needs, one of the four agencies we reviewed has adopted a strategic approach to its workforce planning efforts. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has instituted an action plan that links its foreign language program to the Bureau's strategic objectives and program goals. This action plan attempts to define the Bureau's strategies, performance measures, responsible parties, and resources needed to address foreign language shortages. In contrast, the other three agencies have yet to pursue overall strategic planning in this area. The Army, the State Department, and the Foreign Commercial Service's foreign language initiatives and programs are not part of a coordinated plan of action in regard to recruitment, training, pay incentives, and workforce restructuring.

In our report, we recommend that the Army, the State Department, and the Foreign Commercial Service develop a comprehensive strategic approach to human capital management and workforce planning in order to better address current and projected shortages in foreign language skills. In their responses, the agencies generally agreed with our findings and recommendation.

Background

Although more than 70 federal agencies have foreign language needs, some of the largest programs are concentrated in the Army, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) records indicate that the government employs just under a thousand translators and interpreters in the job series reserved for this group. The government also employs tens of thousands of individuals who use foreign language skills in positions such as FBI special agents and legal attachés, State Department Foreign Service officers, and Department of Commerce Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) officers.[4] For the four agencies we reviewed, a

[4]OPM does not maintain comprehensive records on the number of federal employees serving in positions requiring foreign language skills.

total of nearly 20,000 staff are employed in positions that require some foreign language proficiency.

Agency management of these resources takes place against the backdrop of an emerging federal issue—strategic human capital management. The foreign language staffing and proficiency shortfalls we discuss in our report can be seen as part of a broader pattern of human capital weaknesses and poor workforce planning that has impacted the operations of agencies across the federal government. In fact, GAO recently designated human capital management as a governmentwide high-risk area on the basis of specific problem areas identified in prior GAO reports.[5] For example, GAO previously testified that the Department of Defense faces looming shortages of intelligence analysts, computer programmers, and pilots.[6] In a subsequent report on trends in federal employee retirements, we found that relatively large numbers of individuals in key math and science fields will be eligible to retire by the end of fiscal year 2006: These include physics (47 percent); chemistry (42 percent); computer specialists (30 percent); and electronics and electrical engineering (27 percent and 28 percent, respectively).[7]

In response to these risks, the administration, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), OPM, and GAO have issued guidance on how agencies can begin the process of strategically managing their staffing resources. For example, OPM has developed a five-step workforce planning model that outlines the basic tenets of effective workforce planning.[8] The president and OMB's guidance stresses that agencies should seek to address shortages of skills by conducting thorough workforce analyses, by using existing personnel flexibilities available to federal agencies, and by identifying additional authorities or flexibilities they might need to remove

[5]U.S. General Accounting Office, *High Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-01-263 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2001).

[6]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Human Capital: Major Human Capital Challenges at the Departments of Defense and State*, GAO-01-565T (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2001).

[7]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Federal Employee Retirements: Expected Increase Over the Next 5 Years Illustrates Need for Workforce Planning*, GAO-01-509 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2001).

[8]U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Strategic Human Resources Management: Aligning With the Mission*, (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 1999).

current obstacles and barriers to effective workforce management.[9] GAO guidance emphasizes the use of a self-assessment checklist for better aligning human capital with strategic planning and core business practices.[10]

Agencies Reported Varied Foreign Language Shortages

Officials in the four agencies we reviewed reported varied types and degrees of foreign language shortages depending on the agency, job position, language, and skill level. They noted shortages of translators and interpreters and people with skills in specific languages, as well as a shortfall in proficiency level among people who use foreign language skills in their jobs. The Army's greatest foreign language needs were for translators and interpreters, cryptologic linguists,[11] and human intelligence collectors.[12] The State Department has not filled all of its positions requiring foreign language skills. And, although the Foreign Commercial Service has relatively few positions that require foreign language proficiency, it had significant shortfalls in personnel with skills in six critical languages. While the FBI does not have a set number of positions for its special agent linguists, these agents must have some level of foreign language proficiency that they can use in conducting investigations. (When identified by language, FBI staffing and proficiency data are classified and are discussed in the classified report mentioned earlier.)

While our report provides detailed staffing and proficiency shortfall data for four agencies, I would like to use the data we obtained for the U.S. Army to illustrate the nature and extent of some of these shortfalls.

The Army provided us data on translator and interpreter positions for six languages it considers critical: Arabic, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Persian-Farsi, Russian, and Spanish (our analysis excluded Spanish because the Army has a surplus of Spanish language translators and interpreters). As

[9]OMB, Bulletin No. 01-07 (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2001).

[10]U.S. General Accounting Office, *Human Capital: A Self-Assessment Checklist for Agency Leaders*, GAO/OGC-00-14G (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2000).

[11]Cryptologic linguists specialize in intercepting and interpreting intelligence information collected electronically.

[12]These employees work with individuals rather than interpret information intercepted electronically or by other means.

shown in table 1, the Army had authorization for 329 translator and interpreter positions for these five languages in fiscal year 2001 but only filled 183 of them, leaving a shortfall of 146 (44 percent).

Table 1: Shortfalls of Army Translators and Interpreters, by Language, Fiscal Year 2001

Language	Authorized positions	Filled positions	Unfilled positions	Percent shortfall
Arabic	84	42	42	50%
Korean	62	39	23	37
Mandarin Chinese	52	32	20	38
Persian-Farsi	40	13	27	68
Russian	91	57	34	37
Total	**329**	**183**	**146**	**44**

Source: U.S. Army response to GAO data collection instrument.

In addition to its needs for translators and interpreters, the Army also has a need for staff with applied language skills. We obtained detailed information on two key job series involving military intelligence—cryptologic linguists and human intelligence collectors. As shown in table 2, the Army had a shortfall of cryptologic linguists in two of the six foreign languages it viewed as most critical—Korean and Mandarin Chinese. Overall, there were 142 unfilled positions, which amounted to a 25 percent shortfall in cryptologic linguists in these two languages.

Table 2: Shortfalls of Army Cryptologic Linguists, by Language, Fiscal Year 2001

Language	Authorized positions	Filled positions	Unfilled positions	Percent shortfall
Korean	434	331	103	24%
Mandarin Chinese	144	105	39	27
Total	**578**	**436**	**142**	**25**

Source: U.S. Army response to GAO data collection instrument.

The Army also had a shortfall of human intelligence collectors in five of the six foreign languages it viewed as most critical in this area—Arabic, Russian, Spanish, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese.[13] Overall, there were 108 unfilled positions, which amounted to a 13 percent shortfall in these five languages. The greatest number of unfilled human intelligence collector positions was in Arabic, but the largest percentage shortfall was in Mandarin Chinese. Table 3 provides data on these shortfalls, by language.

Table 3: Shortfalls of Army Human Intelligence Collectors, by Language, Fiscal Year 2001

Language	Authorized positions	Filled positions	Unfilled positions	Percent shortfall
Arabic	209	170	39	19%
Russian	205	197	8	4
Spanish	181	163	18	10
Korean	174	149	25	14
Mandarin Chinese	58	40	18	31
Total	**827**	**719**	**108**	**13**

Source: U.S. Army response to GAO data collection instrument.

Impact of Language Shortages on Agency Operations

The shortages that agencies reported can have a significant impact on agency operations. Although it is sometimes difficult to link foreign language skills to a specific outcome or event, foreign language shortages have influenced some agency activities. Here are a few examples:

- The Army has noted that a lack of linguists is affecting its ability to conduct current and anticipated human and signal intelligence missions. As a result, the Army said that it does not have the linguistic capacity to support two concurrent major theaters of war.

- The need for Spanish speakers has been an issue in pursuing Florida health care fraud cases. The assistant U.S. attorney in Miami in charge of health care fraud investigations recently advised the FBI that his office would decline to prosecute health care fraud cases unless timely

[13]There was no shortfall in Persian-Farsi speakers.

translations of Spanish conversations were available. This situation has important implications, since the Miami region has the nation's largest ongoing health care fraud investigation. The FBI estimates that Medicare and Medicaid losses in the region are in excess of $3 billion.

- The FBI's Los Angeles office has also cited a critical need for Spanish language specialists and language monitors for cases involving violent gang members. According to the Bureau, being able to target these gang members will save lives in Los Angeles but is contingent on the availability of Spanish linguists to assist with these investigations.

- The need for foreign language speakers has hindered State Department operations. The deputy director of the State Department's National Foreign Affairs Training Center recently testified on this topic.[11] She said that shortfalls in foreign language proficiency have contributed to a lack of diplomatic readiness. As a result, the representation and advocacy of U.S. interests abroad has been less effective; U.S. exports, investments, and jobs have been lost; and the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking has been weakened.

- Finally, the lack of translators has thwarted efforts to combat terrorism. For instance, the FBI has raised concern over the thousands of hours of audio tapes and pages of written material that have not been reviewed or translated due to a lack of qualified linguists.

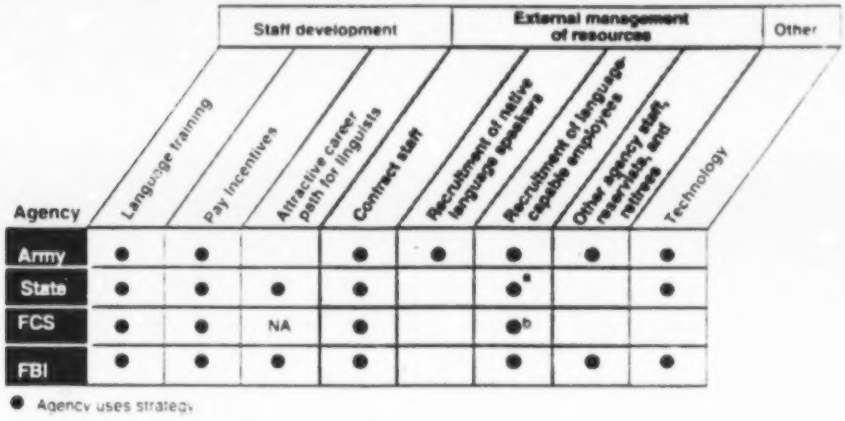
Agencies Use a Variety of Strategies to Meet Their Foreign Language Needs

Our second objective was to examine federal agencies' strategies to address these foreign language shortages. The agencies we reviewed are pursuing three general strategies to meet their foreign language needs. First, agencies are focusing on staff development by training staff in foreign languages, providing pay incentives for individuals using those skills, and ensuring an attractive career path for linguists or language-proficient employees. Second, agencies are making use of external resources. This effort can include contracting staff as needed; recruiting native or U.S.–trained language speakers; or drawing on the expertise of other agency staff, reservists, or retirees. Third, several agencies have begun to use technology to leverage limited staff resources, including developing

[11]Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Statement by the deputy director, National Foreign Affairs Training Center, Department of State*, 106th Cong., 2nd sess., 14 September 2000.

databases of contract linguists, employing language translation software, and performing machine screening of collected data. Figure 1 provides an overview of these categories and related strategies.

Figure 1: Strategies That Four U.S. Agencies Use to Address Foreign Language Shortages and Shortfalls



[a]State's Office of Language Services recruits and hires skilled linguists; however, foreign language skills are not required to apply for Foreign Service positions.

[b]At the Foreign Commercial Service, hard-to-fill language-designated positions are sometimes filled by individuals who are recruited and hired as noncareer limited appointees who have the needed language skills.

Source: GAO analysis.

While these assorted efforts have had some success, current agency strategies have not fully met the need for some foreign language skills, as evidenced by the continuing staffing and proficiency shortfalls that each agency we reviewed faces.

Limited Progress Made on Workforce Planning

Our third objective was to analyze federal agencies' efforts to implement an overall strategic workforce plan to address current and projected foreign language shortages. To help fill existing skills shortages, some agencies have begun to adopt a strategic approach to human capital management and workforce planning. As I mentioned earlier, OPM has issued a workforce planning model that illustrates the basic tenets of strategic workforce planning. We used this model to assess the relative maturity of

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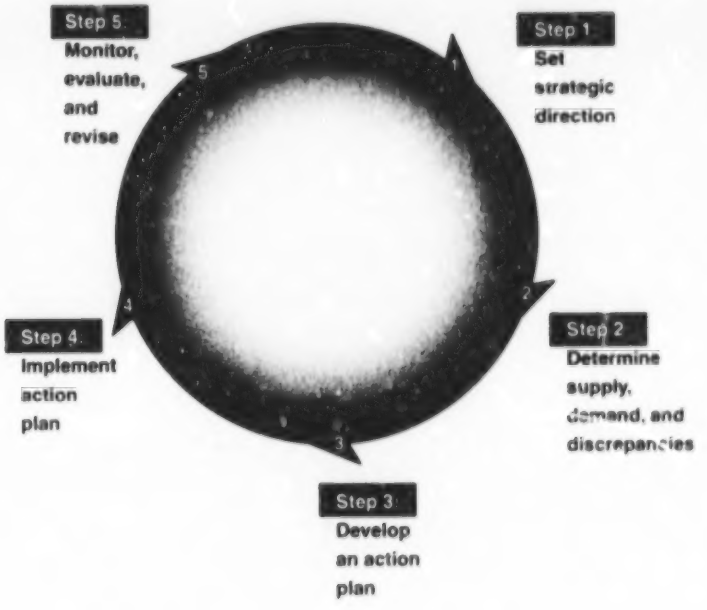
workforce planning at the four agencies we reviewed. As shown in figure 2, this model suggests that agencies follow a five-step process that includes setting a strategic direction, documenting the size and nature of skills gaps, developing an action plan to address these shortages, implementing the plan, and evaluating implementation progress on an ongoing basis. This is a model that could be used to guide workforce planning efforts as they relate to other skills needed in the federal government such as math, science, and information technology.

Figure 2: OPM Workforce Planning Model



Source: OPM's Workforce Planning Model (http://www.opm.gov/workforceplanning/wfpmodel.htm).

We found that the FBI has made an effort to address each of the five steps in OPM's model. For instance, the FBI has instituted an action plan that links its foreign language program to the Bureau's strategic objectives and program goals. This action plan defines strategies, performance measures, responsible parties, and resources needed to address current and projected language shortages. We found that the FBI's work in the foreign language area was supported by detailed reports from field offices that documented the Bureau's needs. The FBI reviewed these reports along with workload statistics from its regional offices. FBI officials noted that implementation progress is routinely tracked and adjustments to the action plan are made as needed.

In contrast, the other three agencies have yet to pursue this type of comprehensive strategic planning and had only completed some of the steps outlined in OPM's planning model. The Army has limited its efforts to developing a plan partially outlining a strategic direction and identifying its available supply and demand for staff with foreign language skills (addressing only steps 1 and 2 of the OPM model). The State Department has not yet set a strategic direction for its language program; however, the department has addressed step 2 in the workforce planning model through its annual survey of ambassadors regarding foreign language needs at their posts on a position-by-position basis. State has yet to develop an action plan and the related implementation and monitoring steps described in OPM's model. Finally, the status of the Foreign Commercial Service's language program closely mirrored the situation we found at the State Department. One difference, however, is that the agency surveys senior officers regarding a post's foreign language needs every 3 years instead of annually. Another difference is that FCS officials indicated that they have begun a workforce planning initiative that is designed to address the key components outlined in the OPM model.

In closing, I would like to note that foreign language shortages have developed over a number of years. It will take time, perhaps years, to overcome this problem. Effective human capital management and workforce planning, however, offer a reasonable approach to resolving such long-standing problems.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee members may have.

Contacts and Acknowledgements

For future contacts regarding this testimony, please call Susan S. Westin or Phillip R. Herr at (202) 512-4128. Mike ten Kate also made key contributions to this testimony.